

The Piebald Piper

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Qilingatsaq watched his grandfather slip his feet inside the polar bear skin trousers. He lifted his head as Equ stood up, watched him slip his arms inside the straps that held the heavy trousers up, before slipping his feet inside a worn but warm pair of sealskin *kamikker*. Equ sat down and beckoned for Qilingatsaq to cross the kitchen floor and join him.

“Where are your skin trousers, Qilingatsaq?” Equ asked, as he tugged at the threadbare jogging trousers the young Maratse wore.

“I don’t have any, *ata*.”

Equ pointed to the utility room beside the kitchen, and said, “Look in the cupboard.”

Qilingatsaq padded into the utility room, clambered over and around the litter of shoes and boots until he reached the cupboard. The door swung wide open when he tugged at the handle, and his eyes widened when he saw the child-sized pair of polar bear skin trousers hanging on a wooden hanger. He reached up to unhook the trousers, removed them from the hanger and then clamped them to his chest as he made his way back to the kitchen. The polar bear hairs tickled Qilingatsaq’s nose as he pressed his face into them.

“*Juullimi pilluarit*,” Equ said, tousling Qilingatsaq’s hair as he leaned against him. “Now put them on. We have work to do.”

Qilingatsaq slipped his thin legs inside the skin trousers while Equ helped him adjust the straps. He smoothed his small hands through the thick hairs, before running into the utility room to take his *kamikker* down from the line stretched across the room and tied to the metal water pipes. Qilingatsaq used a broom handle to knock his *kamikker* onto the floor. He let the broom clatter and slide along the wall as he slipped his feet inside the sealskin shoes. Equ joined him in the utility room and they both pulled on winter coats before stepping outside.

“*Ata*,” Qilingatsaq said, as they walked down corridors of deep snow. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” Equ said, and then nothing more until the path stopped at a snow staircase leading up and onto the rocks beside their house. Equ pointed and waited for Qilingatsaq to climb the steps. “Do you remember the bitch with pups?” he said, as he caught his breath at the top of the steps.

“*Iiji*.”

Equ smiled, and said, “Come and see.”

Qilingatsaq’s eyes lit up as he caught the first snuffles of the young sledge dog puppies. He smelled them a second later—a mix of sour socks and sawdust. He picked up one of the puppies, feeling its warm and slick body in his hands as he reached inside the doghouse, only to let it go when its mother twitched beside him.

“Wait for it,” Equ said. He pointed at a tiny white puppy with chocolate and black patches on his head and rump.

The puppy opened its mouth wide, then closed it. Wide again. Then closed.

“It can’t breathe,” Qilingatsaq said.

“It’s okay,” Equ said. “It’s not trying to breathe; it’s trying to sing.”

“It wants to sing?”

“*Imaqa*,” Equ said. “Maybe.” He tugged Qilingatsaq’s arm, and they moved away from the doghouse. “Are your trousers warm?” he asked.

“*Iiji*.”

“You feel like a hunter now, eh?”

“I am a hunter, *ata*.”

“Good,” Equ said. “And hunters must look after their dogs.”

“*Iiji*.”

“These are your dogs now, Qilingatsaq. Will you look after them like a hunter looks after his dogs?”

“*Iiji*.”

“Every day, even on Christmas Eve?”

“I will, *ata*.”

“Good.” Equ pointed at the piebald pup, and said, “He is the smallest. You need to keep a special eye on him.”

Qilingatsaq nodded, as he knelt in the snow in front of the doghouse.

“And you will come in when you are cold?”

“*Iiji*.”

Equ left Qilingatsaq with the puppies as he organised the food for the team he had anchored down on the ice. Qilingatsaq was still with the pups when he returned forty minutes later. He didn’t move when Equ called that it was time to come and eat. And only when Equ came to fetch him did Qilingatsaq look up.

“Your fingers are turning blue, Qilingatsaq. You must come inside.”

“Not yet, *ata*,” he said.

“No?” Equ knelt beside his grandson. “Why not?”

“I’m waiting for my piper to sing.”

